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ABSTRACT

This paper explains how oral competence in foreign languages is developed by applying constructivist pedagogic methodology to the four language skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Foreign language constructivist methodology departs from the information processing model and behaviorist teaching that guide the transmission of foreign language teaching. In contrast, the learner-centered pedagogic approach inherent to foreign language constructivism is geared to enhancing self-directed learning and to promoting foreign language communicative competence through authentic language use in the classroom. This methodology endorses current positive foreign language pedagogic values, such as authenticity and collaboration and the encouragement of active engagement in learning. This is primarily achieved through the use of thematically-focused communicative activities, which create energizing living experiences in the foreign language. This paper shows how to use these affect-structuring techniques of emotional anchors, motivators, and cognitive direction to design these constructivist foreign language experiences and gives practical examples of their application in a multicultural, multi-ability and multi-age French class. (Author/KFT)

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**Title of paper:** ***Constructivist Pedagogy for authentically Activating Oral Skills in the Foreign Language Classroom***

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**Abstract**

This paper explains how oral competence in foreign languages is developed by applying constructivist pedagogic methodology to the four language skills of Speaking, Listening, Reading and Writing. FL constructivist methodology radically departs from the information processing model and behaviourist teaching that guides traditional transmission FL teaching. In contrast, the learner-centred pedagogic approach inherent to FL constructivism is geared to enhancing self-directed learning and to promoting FL communicative competence through authentic language use in the language class. This methodology endorses current positive FL pedagogic values, such as authenticity and collaboration and the encouragement of active engagement in learning. This is primarily achieved through the use of thematically-focused communicative activities which create energising living experiences in the foreign language. This paper shows how to use the three affect-structuring techniques of Emotional anchors, Motivators and Cognitive direction to design these constructivist FL experiences and gives practical examples of their application in a multicultural, multi-ability and multi-age French class.

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Paper to be presented at the Foreign Language Forum (A Colloquium on the Languages, Literatures and Cultures of the French and Spanish Caribbean).
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***Constructivist Pedagogy for authentically Activating Oral Skills in the Foreign Language Classroom***

This paper introduces Constructivist Foreign Language (CFL) teaching and demonstrates its fundamental role in developing oral competence by practising all the four language skills of Speaking, Listening, Reading and Writing in the communicative FL classroom. CFL is a communicative FL methodology which acknowledges that each student constructs his or her own understanding from the bricks of his or her experiences (Mareschal & Schultz, 1996; Sigel & Cocking, 1977; Wadsworth, 1971). CFL is implemented in the communicative FL class by designing FL activities which, not only use cognitive strategies but also affective strategies. This use of both cognitive and affective strategies enhances the learner's holistic FL understanding which is spurred by both the learner's cognitive response and his or her emotional involvement in the content of the FL lesson (Scovel, 1978). This paper uses a practical example of CFL teaching of a French lesson to illustrate this constructivist paradigm.

***Describing CFL pedagogy***

CFL pedagogy is a pedagogy which gives consideration to both the cognitive and affective aspects of FL learning. CFL teaching methodology differs from traditional FL teaching methods which assume, to a large extent, transmission of content knowledge from the teacher to the learner. Traditionally, FL content knowledge is considered as objective fact which is transmitted according to a 'logical' sequential hierarchy. An example of this is the ordered teaching of French tenses in a lockstep fashion, which suggests teaching the present tense, then the perfect tense with 'avoir', then with 'être' and so on, which is then followed by objective assessment of (i) how much the learner can recall of the linguistic content knowledge taught and (ii) how accurately he or she can apply it to similar language situations. Language recall and grammatical accuracy are two common objectives of traditional FL instruction courses in Modern Languages Departments of established Caribbean universities.

Notwithstanding the practical value of these two cognitive aims of traditional university FL instruction, CFL teaching further adds feelings and emotions to cognitive learning (Beebe & Ivy, 1994; Lozanov, 1979; Mateva, 1997; Sylwester, 1994) using involving communicative language experiences; in other words, CFL recognises the indivisibility of affect and cognition in all learning experiences that occur in the communicative FL classroom. CFL teaching identifies two overarching pedagogic humanistic aims which enhance learning, (i) Enculturation and (ii) Empowerment.

The first CFL pedagogic aim is 'Enculturation'. Enculturation is the process by which the learner sensitizes himself or herself to the values inherent to the foreign language and its culture, while acquiring the linguistic and sociocultural FL skills to become an increasingly competent FL user. This first aim is achieved by designing classroom learning activities which enable the learner to internalize the culture of the subject (Bishop, 1991; Jacobson, 1996). These are activities which not only emphasize linguistic skill-development but also highlight appropriate values to the extent these may alter the learner's conceptual schema and value system. The role of the CFL teacher is to imbue the learner with the values intrinsic to the foreign language being studied by using affect-structuring learning experiences through which these values can be experienced.

The second CFL pedagogic aim is 'Empowerment'. Empowerment is the process by which the learner grows as a self-directed life-long learner (Bourdet, 1992; Carter, 1997; Clachar, 1999; Dale, & Liss, 1996; Nunan, 1988;




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Togle & Bito, 1991); a vital characteristic for full socioprofessional participation in the second millenium. CFL teaching enables the learner to increasingly choose what to learn and how to learn it and hence become an autonomous learner. The importance of becoming an autonomous learner of French was investigated by Carter at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine campus, who explained that "by becoming an autonomous learner you take charge of your own learning… you become more aware of your individual learning style… you learn about learning strategies" (1998, p. 114). Thus, empowerment is realised by the learner's metacognition what content and ability he or she has and how these can be used to enhance his or her own learning. The role of the CFL teacher is to provide sufficient and diverse bases of learning experiences on which the learner can make informed decisions towards empowerment.

These two pedagogic aims of CFL teaching are achieved through the use of classroom activities that are designed to guarantee that the learner will succeed (McCombs & Wisler, 1997; Met & Galloway, 1992; Salmon, 1996). These activities, called 'surface purposes', can range from simple rote-learning games to complex needs-driven social communication tasks. What surface purpose activities have in common is that they distract students' attention from the 'pedagogic purpose' of the teacher by focussing the learner's awareness on the surface purpose of the activity. The surface purpose is designed to be an engrossing contextualised activity in which the learner acquires the cognitive aspects of the syllabus to the limit of his or her ability (Dudley-Marling & Searle, 1991; Entwistle, 1997; Halliday, 1991; Krashen, 1985; Littlewood, 1981; Ormaggio Hadley, 1993; McCombs & Whisler, 1997; Salmon, 2000; Tschirner, 1992). However, the pedagogic purpose of the CFL teacher, 'hidden' under the surface purpose, is that the learner gains target communicative FL skills.

***Designing CFL classroom activities***

Planning the objectives of a CFL lesson is like planning the objectives of a journey. Although the intention of reaching a particular place at the end of the journey is determined at the outset, opportunities arise to also go to places which may need to be visited. Similarly, the CFL lesson may need a 'visit' to some other areas of the syllabus which had not been planned initially by the teacher. This non-linear, non-hierarchical pursuit of course objectives, which is referred as 'needs chaining', acknowledges the individual non-linear, non-hierarchical structure of concept learning in the communicative CFL classroom.

But what are the key constituting elements necessary for designing a pedagogically successful CFL lesson?
The crucial element within a CFL lesson is the identification of surface purposes, that is each activity is realised through an involving theme. The importance of learners' involvement had been stressed by Salmon (2000, p. 68) who argued that "Affectively, contextual teaching/learning has the potential to stimulate and motivate students towards a high level of interest, enthusiasm, participation, and achievement".
The selected theme uses Bastick's three subjectivist techniques: an emotional anchor, cognitive direction and a motivator (1999a; 1999b; 1999c). These three affect-structuring techniques, which are described below, utilise positive experiences so that the learner attributes his or her success to his or her own cognitive efforts.

The emotional anchor sets and captures the learner's feelings for the duration of the activity, so whatever he or she thinks, says and does during the activity is related to the activity. The emotional anchor is essential to ensure that the learner remains 'on task' throughout the activity.

The cognitive direction sets the learner the activity to be performed; it describes the scenario and directs the learner to information relevant to the activity. The cognitive direction also guides the organisation of the learning experience and this cognitive-structuring facilitates the realisation of the pedagogic aim.

The motivator promotes the learner's intrinsic need to participate in the learning experience, assists the learner's ownership of the activity and results in the learner's successful and gratifying learning experience.

Used together, these three CFL techniques promote successful self-directed FL learning (Boufoy-Bastick, 2000, p. 102). This is now illustrated in the following description of a CFL lesson.

***An illustrative example of CFL teaching***

An example of a CFL lesson is illustrated by a French workshop given for a multi-cultural, mixed-age and mixed-ability range at the University of the South Pacific, in Fiji. The surface purpose of the lesson was a debate of nuclear testing in the Pacific. This surface purpose was chosen because students were self-motivated by the opportunity to express their disapproval of nuclear testing in the Pacific.

The students had taken part in street protests against nuclear testing carried out in Polynesia in 1996. The personal involvement and strong feelings of the French students in this newsworthy topic was *the motivator*. The *emotional anchor* was a commercial video clip initiating a discussion of nuclear testing and showing the bomb blast rupturing the students' 'peaceful South Pacific paradise'. The *cognitive direction* was the question 'Pour ou Contre les essais nucléaires' (For or Against nuclear testing).

The pedagogic purpose was to learn and practise an argument register in French. It aimed at the integrative use of the four language skills of Speaking, Listening, Reading and Writing in communication-driven activities to enhance oral use of the foreign language. The integration of the four skills enabled students to lay necessary sound cognitive language building blocks which gave them the confidence to express their views without restraint or reserve in front of the class. This was further supported by the pedagogic organisation of the lesson which consisted of encouraging individual contributions, practising them and bringing each individual's contributions together in small groups ending with a presentation to the whole class in which each student was a stake-holder. This organisation ensured that each student's practised contributions and received valued social recognition from the whole class. This was achieved integratively using smaller surface purposes involving the students' participation as journalists and party officials, preparing for a live TV debate with one party is 'Pour' and the other party 'Contre' and ending with a ballot. The pedagogic purpose of these activities was to develop students' linguistic competence through the four language skills of Speaking, Listening, Reading and Writing and in particular to enable them to express themselves orally with confidence. The success of the CFL activities is judged by how completely these pedagogic purposes remained below the awareness of the students.

Following are descriptions of the six integrative activities. These show how the energy of the class is choreographed and how needs-driven communication is privileged in this constructivist French lesson. These short descriptions of the six constituent CFL activities first present the setting, secondly the surface purpose and thirdly the hidden pedagogic purpose for each activity.

*1st activity: Headline that article*

Setting: A small group of investigative journalists working in a Paris news office.
Surface purpose: As investigative journalists, students need to be able to find a suitable headline for a news article. When the group has decided on a headline they put it on the editor's desk, simulated by the teacher's OHP.
Pedagogic purpose: Dual purpose of (i) practising reading French for understanding to the socially-defined standard of agreeing a one-line summary (the headline) and (ii) practising and learning relevant lexical register.

*2nd activity: List arguments 'Pour our Contre'*

Setting: A small group of potential spokespeople (ministers) working as political researchers in the party's research office.
Surface purpose: As official party spokespeople, students must be able to give arguments for their party and be aware of what questions journalists may ask against them.
Pedagogic purpose: Further practice of skills introduced in the first activity and integrative use of the four language skills.



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The atmosphere of this activity is choreographed to give a sense of urgency-building which is to contrast with the controlled climax of the ballot result, in the same way as the media build the climax to an election result.

*3rd activity: Choosing your arguments*

Setting: The party central office. Each party member chooses an argument with which he or she feels comfortable and agrees, with the party leader, to be the official party spokesperson for this argument and/or an investigative journalist against an opposition argument.
Surface purpose: Party leader agrees who should be the official party spokesperson for the various arguments and prepare journalists with challenging questions for the opposition. Each spokesperson must choose an argument that he or she can repeat in the TV debate and about which he or she can answer opposing journalists' questions.
Pedagogic purpose: To focus the students on smaller content areas in which they can achieve high mastery level and inevitable success judged by social/peer approval.

This activity allows each student to choose the argument and question with which he or she feels most comfortable. However, it is to the party's interest that the lower ability students are given preference of choice and 'coached' if necessary, by party members who have higher ability. This ensures needs-driven communication for this activity.

*4th activity: Interviewing the whistle-blowers*

Setting: Students in their roles as journalists have a tip-off to go to a warehouse and to a hotel room for inside information.
Surface purpose: Anonymous party defectors are willing to 'spill the beans' and divulge confidential information at the last moment before the debate. This can help investigative journalists to expose the official spokespeople who support nuclear testing during the live TV debate, by asking the 'right' questions.
Pedagogic purpose: The whistle-blowers, and if necessary their aids, are chosen as reasonably competent speakers so that the students can, by phrasing their argument as a question, both practise and hear French relevant to increasing their mastery of the chosen content further guaranteeing their public success in the debating activity.

*5th activity: The live TV debate*

Setting: A TV studio with a presenter/compère (the teacher), an expert panel of the two party leaders and their aids who will call their official spokespeople, in front of the audience of investigative journalists.
Surface purpose: Dual purpose is (i) as spokespeople, to convince the TV viewing public of their party's point of view, *Pour ou Contre les essais nucléaires dans le Pacifique*, and (ii) as investigative journalists in the audience, to represent the viewing public, by asking searching questions of the official spokespeople, possibly exposing any hidden agenda.
Pedagogic purpose: To experience success, in terms of social/peer approval, by publicly demonstrating competence at a high level of mastery.

The teacher's role of compère/commentator, under the guise of explaining for the 'less knowledgeable' viewing public, allows some control and enables subtly correction, simplification and encouragement of the students' contributions in French for the other students.

*6th activity: The ballot*

Setting: French polling station where everyone casts his or her vote *Pour ou Contre les essais nucléaires dans le Pacifique*.
Surface purpose: To resolve what is the public's opinion.
Pedagogic purpose: Throughout the lesson it has been necessary for the students to support arguments to which they are opposed. This ballot resolves any frustration by, first, allowing students to vote for their true opinion,

and secondly, as the outcome will most certainly be in their favour, it rewards them for their participation in the lesson by giving them the result they all want, that is to express their disapproval of nuclear testing in the Pacific – this outcome fulfils the surface purpose of the lesson.

The ballot also gives the opportunity to further enculturate the students by demonstrating how the French vote. This cultural addition was made relevant to lesson by the surface purpose ballot activity chosen to close the lesson.

***Evaluating the CFL lesson***

Students' skills can be evaluated using standard language assessments. However, CFL teaching can be evaluated by using students' feedback of the lesson (McManus & Gettinger, 1996). As opposed to feedback on traditional FL teaching, which surveys what aspects of the pedagogy students like or dislike, feedback on CFL teaching should show that students only evaluate the surface purposes. This indicates that the pedagogic purposes of the lesson remained below the students' awareness. Hence, the CFL lesson is a success when the students' feedback comments referred only to liking and disliking the surface purposes.

This paper has shown how constructivist pedagogic strategies utilise the four linguistic skills to promote appropriate oral expression in communicative foreign language teaching and allow learners to become competent foreign language speakers.

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